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Mike Ashley. *Out of This World: Science Fiction, But Not As You Know It*

London: British Library, 2011. 144 p. ISBN 978-0-7123-5835-4

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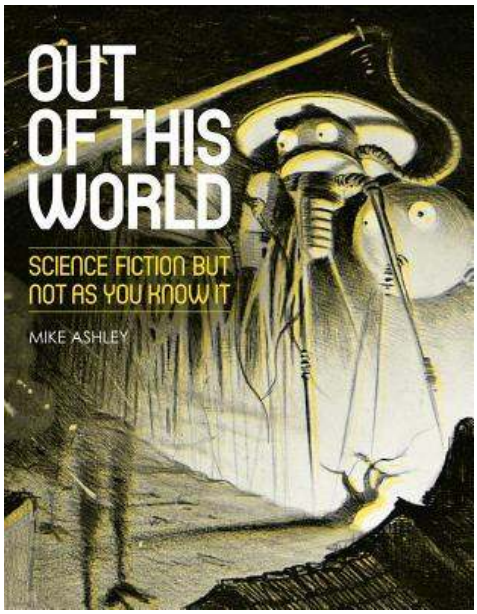

1 The British Library held an exhibition on science fiction from 25 May to 25 September, 2011. Mike Ashley's beautiful companion volume, *Out of This World*, offers a brilliant, illustrated history of science fiction. Destined for newcomers to the genre, the oversize tome provides a useful handbook and even some tidbits of lesser-known factoids for the specialist. I highly recommend this work for all libraries and coffee tables.

2 Ashley has proven himself to be one of the genre's foremost historians, working in the field since the 1970s and having recently published a detailed, three-volume history of sf in magazines. He organizes his vast topic, of which he asserts that "[o]ne of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate the scope of science fiction" (6), into six major chapters : Alien Worlds, Time and Parallel Worlds, Virtual Worlds, Future Worlds, The End of the World, and Perfect Worlds. These chapters are then subdivided into three to seven smaller sections of two to five pages each. The volume's most attractive trait is, of course, its 175 color illustrations, which include book and magazine covers and illustrations, film stills and sets, works of art, author portraits, manuscript pages, and even photos of astronomical features and space travel.

3 Ashley's approach is largely historical and I can think of no better way to obtain a survey of the genre's origins and major tropes than one accompanied by beautiful illustrations from its earliest precursors, through the nineteenth century and its Golden Age of the 1930s – 1950s. Although Ashley cites works from every decade of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, mentioning authors like Ballard, Le Guin, Rucker, Stephenson, Gibson and Miéville, the work's only shortcoming lies here. The balance clearly tips more toward the past than the present. Similarly, while an international corpus of works is included in the discussion, emphasis lies clearly an Anglo-American corpus.

4 Indeed, Ashley digs deep to name the earliest possible texts for each sub-genre, locating the origins of Alien Worlds narratives in the *voyage extraordinaire* traced back to the Classical Era in Lucian, but really developing in the seventeenth century. He includes works like Marco Polo's and John de Mandéville's voyages, and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as precursors, with extensive coverage of nineteenth-century works. In addition to the extraordinary voyage perfected, of course, by Verne, Ashley devotes sections to the moon voyage, "The Need to Believe" in life on the moon and then on Mars, "Forgotten Visionaries," "Deep Space," "Confronting the Alien." He concludes the chapter with a section on "Colony and Empire," which he fails to counterbalance with a section on the rising form of anti-empire or "postcolonial science fiction." Ashley mentions key texts dating from Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638), which has "a good claim to [... being] the first work of science fiction in English" to more recent works like Kim

Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy (1992-1996) and the Chinese author Liu Cixin's untranslated *San Ti* (2007).

5 Ashley takes care to mention a wide range of significant texts for each category, which means that the historical narrative accompanying the illustrations can rarely offer more than a brief plot summary, but his choice of texts and the volume's organization represents an analytical approach in itself. In addition, feature insets on two dozen key authors ranging from Swift and Cyrano de Bergerac to P. K. Dick, Vernor Vinge, and Christopher Priest via Jules Verne and Albert Robida, complement the volume's encyclopedic approach. Only two women authors, however, are granted such consideration : Ursula K. Le Guin and Katherine Burdekin, the latter known only for her alternate history, *Swastika Night* (1937). Additional pedagogical materials include a chronology, an index, and a list of "Further Reading," as well as the "Just imagine" inset boxes which spur the reader to think about questions similar to those explored by the science-fiction writers featured in each section

6 From the imaginary and space voyages of the first section, Ashley takes his reader through an examination of "Time and Parallel Worlds," dividing his topic into sections which address various concepts of time, time travel, alternate history, steampunk and parallel worlds. One of my favorite illustrations, the 1952 *Colliers* magazine first page and illustration of Ray Bradbury's seminal text "A Sound of Thunder," appears in this section. Again, in addition to the best-known, "classic" texts and precursors, Ashley mentions a number of works not often cited, thus offering even specialists the opportunity to learn more about the various sub-genres. In particular, he traces the alternate history back to Livy and identifies a Spanish text as the first purposeful time machine story. He also points out that William Gibson and Bruce Sterling did not invent steampunk, identifying Joan Aiken's *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962) and several 1980s works by Michael Moorcock as doing so.

7 The chapter on Virtual Worlds explores alternate realities including not only cyberspace, but dream worlds and the question "What is Reality ?" This relatively brief chapter links the notion of the alternate reality to Descartes's dictum that "I think therefore I am" and Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It covers iconic works like *Alice in Wonderland* and several Mark Twain stories, as well as the Brontë childrens' elaborate imaginary world of Angria and the development of the term virtual reality by computer scientist Jaron Lanier.

8 Chapter four, "Future Worlds" is necessarily a lengthy one, given that "the future is synonymous with science fiction," according to Ashley (76). He identifies a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works that seek to imagine the future in the chapter's first section, including obvious texts like Mercier's *The Year 2440*, alongside a little-known 1644 pamphlet by Francis Cheynell and a Danish-Norwegian play, *Anno 7603* from 1781. Among the artifacts that we normally would not see in a work on the history of science fiction, but that the volume's particular approach allows Ashley to exploit, figures a series of influential posters by British graphic artist William Heath entitled "The March of Intellect" (1825-29). Further sections explore the questions of "Be Prepared !" for future wars, "Inventing the Future," "Cities of the Future," and "Machine or Human," which looks at the iconic figure of the robot. Ashley gives significant coverage to the concept of the "Singularity," the moment when technology will have advanced so far that an artificial intelligence spontaneously achieves consciousness, identified by Vernor Vinge in a 1993 speech. He also describes

nanotechnology, identifying Charles Stross's *Singularity Sky* (2003) and Rudy Rucker's *Postsingular* (2007), as novels exploring this area.

9 "The End of the World" presents the apocalyptic vein in science fiction, which Ashley links back to the legendary floods depicted in a number of religious mythologies. Some more strictly science-fictional causes for the end of the world are also explored in sections on "Plague and Pestilence," "Perils from Space"—which includes early comet narratives—and "Nuclear War." Ashley asserts that as early as the 1890s stories about the release of atomic energy had appeared, positing H. G. Wells' *The World Set Free* (1914) as the novel which "first described the use of atomic bombs in a global war" (120). He cites a number of post-Hiroshima novels, including Judith Merril's *Shadow on the Hearth* (1950), but also international works like Manuel de Pedrolo's *Mecanoscrito del Segundo origen* (1974), Gudrun Pausewang's *The Last Children of Schewenborn* (1983), and Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* (2003).

10 Ashley concludes the volume with an examination of "The Perfect World," covering the various iterations that utopia has taken not only since More's seminal novel, *Utopia* (1516), but as far back as Aristophanes' *The Birds* (414 B.C.E) and Plato's *Republic* (c. 380 B.C.E.). Another of my favorite illustrations appears here : a diagram of the ideal city in Ebenezer Howard's nineteenth-century utopian novel *To-morrow* (1893). Ashley covers the topic admirably in the space of a few pages, identifying the key "First Utopias," the popularity of the utopia in the nineteenth century, spurred both in France by works like Cabet's *Voyage to Icaria* (1840) and Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887). He discusses the feminist utopia and dystopia from *Herland* (1915) to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), as well as the anti-utopias like *We* (1921), *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). Ashley closes his work with the question, "What is Perfect ?"

11 If I had a time machine, I think I would travel back to September 2011 in order to visit this exhibit at the British Library. Since that notion remains in the realm of fiction, this beautiful companion volume allows me to take an imaginary voyage through the world of science fiction. Before closing, I should note that another library exhibit also resulted in a companion volume with the same title. In 1995, Canada's National Library honored the genre with an exhibit largely sourced from the Toronto Public Library's Merril Collection. Edited by Andreas Paradis and titled *Out of This World : Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (and also published in a French version), that volume offers essays by a number of Canadian scholars and writers on the genre's development in Canada. Since there is absolutely no overlap in content, I recommend both volumes.

AUTHORS

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